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Mining the Media Archive

WHEN HISTORY MEETS SIMULATION IN THE RECENT WORK OF DARA BIRNBAUM AND STAN DOUGLAS

by Dot Tuer

As the millennium draws to a close, we are confronted with an entanglement of lived and simulated experience that daily grows more complex. Seeking to comprehend this relationship between the everyday world we embody and the manufactured realm of images that envelop us, we stumble upon both familiar territories and unfamiliar terrain. In the contemporary enthusiasm to refashion the self through technology, echoes of an early modernist embrace of machine over humanity can be heard. The ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision, described by Paul Virilio as "the handling of simultaneous data in a global but unstable environment where the image is the most concentrated but also the most unstable form of information,"¹ finds a resonance in the Futurist's celebration of "simultaneous states of mind."² From the dematerialization of identity taking place in the chat rooms of the Internet to the destabilization of experience occurring through the headgear sets of virtual reality, Charles Baudelaire's poetic vision of modernity as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent,"³ seems as apt a description for the impending fragmentation of the senses taking place in 1997 as it did in 1863.

At the same time, it is also possible that an utopian desire to harness consciousness to the luminous emissions of image machines renders these modernist echoes obsolete. During the emergence of modernity, railroads, telegraphs and standard time cut a swath of grids across a heterogeneous landscape to reconfigure spatial and temporal boundaries. Now the feverish construction of information highways and the global swirl of data threaten to dissolve these boundaries altogether. With the invention of X-rays, photography and cinema, an image of the body was frozen in time and cast into motion. With the advent of nanotechnology and virtual reality, both body and image are caught within a cybernetic feedback loop. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an exponential expansion of knowledge in fields such as biology and physics mapped a comprehension of the self within a scientific sphere and cast it adrift in relativity. At its end, we meet with a conception of the self that is subject to DNA code manipulations, artificial intelligence and image phantasms.

Given the changes that new technologies have wrought, perhaps Baudelaire's poetic vision of modernity is not so appropriate after all. Perhaps instead of a world in flux we have been plunged into a world of fusion and mutation, confusion and contamination. Marshall McLuhan, a media guru writing a hundred years after Baudelaire, envisions this brave new world as the "extension of our central nervous system itself into a global embrace."⁴ Jean Baudrillard, a postmodernist theorist who expands upon McLuhan's prophesy of a global nervous system, proposes that we have left behind a world in flux to enter the realm of the simulacrum. According to Baudrillard's opaque description of the simulacrum we now inhabit, "simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of the real without origin or reality: a hyper-real."⁵ The image now precedes reality; henceforth, argues Baudrillard, "it is the map that engenders the territory."⁶

Baudrillard's encapsulation of the simulacrum as a hyper-real offers a seductive, albeit slightly incomprehensible, theorization for the increasing convergence of lived and simulated experience. Yet paradoxically, his vision of a technologically engineered reality is also uncannily familiar. In his passive acquiescence to a technological omnipotence, a dystopic echo of an early modern embrace of machine over humanity can be heard. From his postmodern pronouncement of a symbolic economy of images completely severed from lived reality, there emerges a modernist lament for a representational purity of originals over copies.

In contrast to the modernist undertones and technological overdetermination that saturate Baudrillard's theorization of the hyperreal, Gilles Deleuze's philosophical reading of the simulacrum offers a way out of an apparent impasse in which both familiar territories and unfamiliar terrain lead back to the same mastery of machines over consciousness. Tracing the idea of the simulacrum back to its philosophical origins in Plato's hostility to the imitation or mimesis of

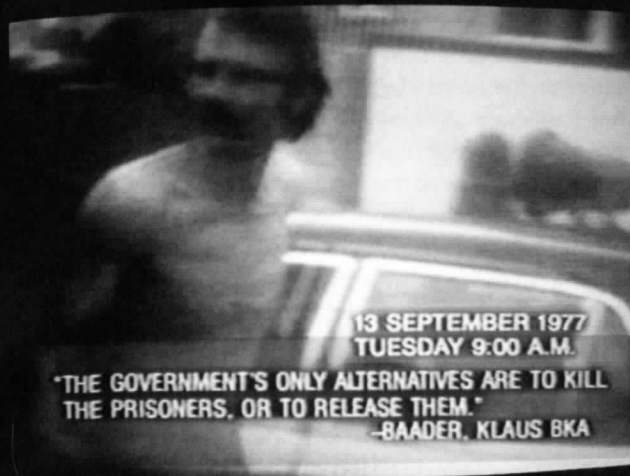
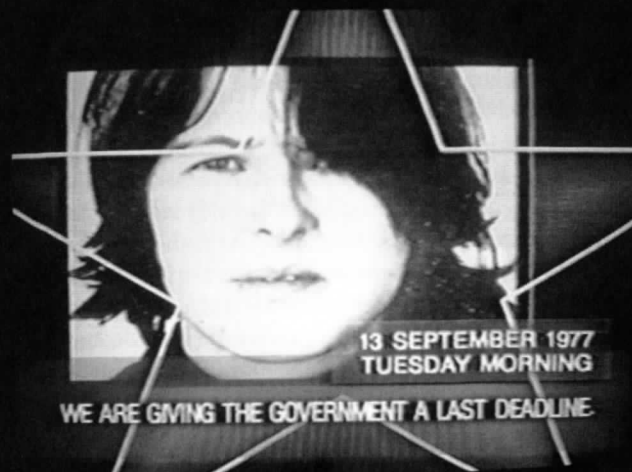
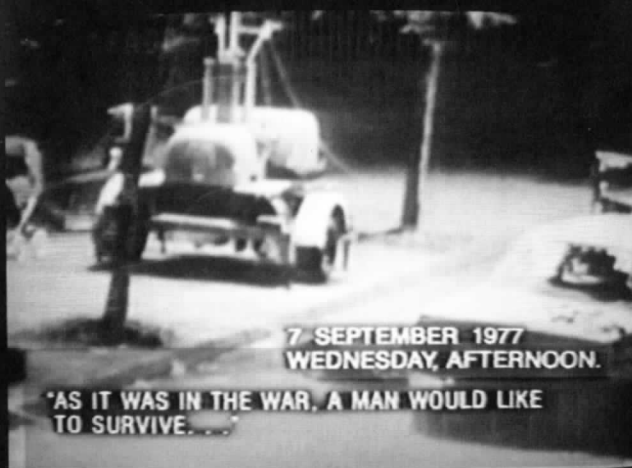
appearances, Deleuze identifies an ancient site of contestation between copies and originals. What is at stake in the simulacrum, argues Deleuze, is an archaic struggle between representational purity and promiscuity that challenges a Platonic order of representation in Western culture privileging sameness over difference.⁷

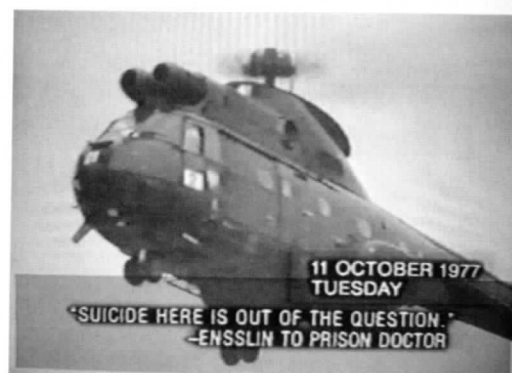
In Deleuze's reading of Plato's hostility to mimesis, he notes that Plato distinguishes between good copies (geometry) and bad copies (images). Good copies are based upon the degree to which the representation of appearances resemble ideal forms or Ideas. Bad copies, on the other hand, are imitations of appearances that seem to perfectly mimic reality. Upon close inspection, however, they do not even remotely resemble the originals they profess to represent. For Plato, it is these bad copies that are the simulacra. They give rise to a false representation that challenges the primacy of sameness linking appearances to good copies to ideal forms. Accordingly, it is the simulacra that Plato represses in the search for knowledge that enlightens rather than deceives, purifies rather than contaminates.

In turn, argues Deleuze, Plato's decision to exorcise the simulacra from the order of representation constructs a legacy in Western culture of repressing difference in favour of sameness. Banished from the Platonic tradition of thought is the power of mimesis to conjure indeterminacy and the power of the copy to affect the original. What is lost in the process, writes Deleuze, "is the state of free, oceanic differences, of nomadic distributions, and crowned anarchy."⁸ Thus to assert the primacy of the simulacrum is not to give into a reality lost in a shuffle of degraded copies, but in Deleuze's words to "render the order of participation, the fixidity of distribution, the determination of hierarchy impossible."⁹

In recent multimedia works by Dara Birnbaum and Stan Douglas, it is this ordered hierarchy of representation that is called into question. Instead of surrendering to a spectre of a seamless hyperreal in which the map precedes the territory, these artists examine what issues emerge when an image map of simulation meets a territory of bodies and histories. Mining the media archives to isolate historical moments in which ideological confrontation is played out through a proliferation of images, they excavate a site of contestation between good copies and bad copies. In the use of multiple video projections, their installations mimic the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision to reflect upon the ways in which a global nervous system conjures and represses the ghosts of difference. Recontextualizing a flow of information through visual strategies of juxtaposition and montage, they position the viewer as an active participant in deciphering the entanglement of simulated and lived experience. In the process, they locate in the simulacrum the potential to pry loose the fixed categories of gender and race from their representational moorings.

In Dara Birnbaum's *Hostage*, a six-channel video installation with an interactive laser beam, an interrogation of a





Installation shot and stills, *Hostage*, Dara Birnbaum, six-channel video and interactive laser installation with Peerless ceiling and wall mounts, and designed ceiling mounts and Plexiglas shields, 1994. Channels 1–5: videotape, colour. Photo by Geoffrey Clements, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

global nervous system at its most nervous ensues. First exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1994, *Hostage* takes as its subject matter the controversial kidnapping of the German industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction in 1977, and the subsequent "suicides" of three of the Baader-Meinhof members who were in Stammheim prison during the hostage-taking crisis. Conjuring image phantoms from history to reveal the internal logic of the simulacrum, Birnbaum escalates a flow of images to the point at which the interface of the screen becomes a death space in which the copies of the simulacra stare down at each other.

In *Hostage*, six video monitors diagonally span the gallery space. Four of the monitors are suspended from the ceiling at the same height as television sets installed in airport waiting lounges. The other two monitors are mounted on opposite corners of the gallery at eye level. A laser beam stretches underneath the four ceiling monitors and connects the two wall monitors. On the four monitors

suspended from the ceiling, self-contained videos running about five minutes long are simultaneously screened. In each a rapid fire montage of television footage from the period of the kidnapping, mug shots of the Red Army Faction, and drawings of the high security wing built at Stammheim to contain members of the Baader-Meinhof group, creates a perceptible chaos from archival images.

At the far corner of the gallery the fifth monitor features clandestine footage of Schleyer that was shot by the kidnappers and then rebroadcast on television by the West German state to "prove" Schleyer was still alive. Below the monitor is located the sender signal of the laser beam. Across the room the sixth monitor plays twelve minutes of fast-cutting news clips from various American newspaper reports on the hostage taking crisis and the Red Army Faction. Beneath it is located the laser's receiver signal. When the viewer passes in front of the laser beam, the news clips on the sixth monitor are frozen in time and space for as long as the viewer remains in the line of the laser's light.

In Birnbaum's installation, only the most determined viewer can piece together from the disparate images of the six monitors a coherent narrative. Fragmented, disjointed, nervous-making, the installation positions the viewer in a place where all the images are collapsed into ubiquity. The viewer, as much as the Germans at the historical moment of the kidnapping, are held hostage to an image machine. It is as if the interface of the screen had gone awry, no longer assuring control but producing anarchy. Here the convergence of simulation and experience is not manifested in the allure of a technological integration but in the shock of finding oneself a target of the simulacrum.

In turn, the role of the viewer as a target is mirrored by Plexiglas silhouettes of a human figure placed in front of each of the ceiling monitors. Resembling firing range targets, these silhouettes are marked with elongated circles that approximate fingerprints. This added layer of simulation evokes another form of ubiquity in which the imprint of the body's contact with the state entangles identity with the flow of classification as well as information, presaging the increasing use of DNA testing, and closer to home, the announcement in Ontario that the Conservative government wants to fingerprint citizens for purposes of welfare fraud control.

At the beginning of each videotape, this target is also reproduced and superimposed upon an electronic identification countdown for the broadcast transmission of United Press International. Serving as an image map for the information flow on the monitors, the superimposition is keyed with the words "roving reporter," a codename for an independent news gathering service. It was from this news service that Birnbaum was able to obtain documentary evidence after all the major mass media sources and German television refused to release their archival footage. As the electronic countdown on each tape reaches zero, the target is riddled with bullet shots, adding to the noise and confusion of the viewing experience.

In making a concerted effort to view each of the videotapes individually, the viewer becomes aware of the way in which the German state used television as an interface of social and political control. Despite the proliferation of images that ensued during the hostage-taking crisis, television did not provide analysis but withheld it. Through the filtering of information, it became an arena of simulated negotiation with the kidnappers that masked the lack of a political will to actually achieve a resolution to the crisis.

As the transmission site for the clandestine images of Schleyer pleading for his life, television served to sensationalize the drama of the situation rather than delineate the issues that lay behind the kidnapping. After the murder and recovery of Schleyer's body, it also served to resurrect the body of Schleyer as a martyr to the nervous system's collapse. During Schleyer's funeral, the *New York Times* reported that "television canceled programs and substituted funeral music," while the *Chicago Tribune* reported on

October 26, 1977, that "the ceremony was televised live into the factories of Daimler-Benz, of which Schleyer had been a director."

In contrast to the spectacle that television created out of Schleyer, there was no media access to the members of the Baader-Meinhof group in prison during the hostage crisis. For them, the television screen was an interface of hidden surveillance witnessed only by the guards at Stammheim prison. As a result, their motives for embracing "terrorism" and their supposed "suicides" were enveloped in a media wrapping of pseudo-psychologizing. Reports on the Baader-Meinhof in the print medium filled in the image gaps of television by constructing a narrative in which gender became the dividing line of monstrosity and violence.

On the sixth monitor in *Hostage* (the one in which the image flow is interrupted by the viewer's presence blocking the laser beam), factual reports on the hostage-taking crisis are interspersed with news stories from American sources that construct a psychology of West German "terrorism" based upon women's participation in the Red Army Faction. *Newsweek* attributes the phenomenon of women's participation in the Baader-Meinhof "to the typical emotional fervor of the female," reporting the denunciation of a German woman politician who declared that "these women negate everything that is part of the established feminine character." The *Chicago Tribune* quotes a German police official in saying "women's participation (in terrorism) is the dark side of women's emancipation." A *Los Angeles Times* headline, "A new generation of deadly young women" is accompanied by an assessment of a German criminologist who links their feminine pathology to "the influence of domineering mothers," and fathers who were "often described as dictatorial and absent." Perhaps the most succinct commentary is proffered by a neighbour of a Baader-Meinhof member who describes for the *L.A. Times* how her infamous neighbour "sang communist songs all night and never cleaned the stairs."

By reordering data through the simulation of an historical moment, Birnbaum reveals the paradoxical determinacy and indeterminacy of gender within a flow of information. Holding up a mirror of the nervous system to itself, she also unveils a deadly embrace of sameness that underlies a surface appearance of difference. Through the interface of the screen, the Baader-Meinhof group and the state engage in a game of mimicry in which each imitates the other in a constant escalation of violence. As a witness to this game of mimicry, the viewer is confronted with the coercive mechanisms of image control that underlie an image proliferation. Caught in the light of the laser beam, s/he experiences a contact with the materiality of information. Alerted to what anthropologist Michael Taussig describes as "the visual contract with reality"¹⁰ in which the copy has the power to influence the original, the viewer sifts through archival data to decipher an historical moment in which an image map of



Evening, Stan Douglas, 1994, three-channel video installation, colour. Photo courtesy David Zwirner gallery.

simulation bled over into the body politic to entangle image and response, terror and repression.

In Birnbaum's use of news reports what also becomes transparent is the inability of the mass media at that historical moment to offer an explanation for the global nervous system's sudden nervousness (outside, of course, of an analysis of women guerrillas as the unfortunate by-product of female emancipation). Time and Newsweek reports from 1977 can provide "no ready explanation for the terrorist movement except that it grew out of the Vietnam War," noting that the "emergence of a fanatical minority has baffled analysts." Such bafflement was not ingenuous. In the attempts by leading European theorists in *Semiotext(e)*'s 1982 German Issue to disentangle the ideological and technological strands that led to the mimetic escalation of violence in Germany, a sense of uneasiness and confusion prevails. The visual design of the journal itself reinforces this unease by dividing each of the pages in half to mimic the division of the Berlin Wall. At the same time, it was here that Paul Virilio first developed his analysis of the ubiquitousness of a contemporary field of vision and Jean Baudrillard began his slippery theoretical slide toward a hyperreal of models without origins.¹¹

In this light, it is interesting to note that when Paul Virilio published *L'Espace Critique* several years later, he contextualized his initial analysis of the ubiquitousness of a

contemporary field of vision by arguing that the image architecture of a global system was generated as a response to the euroterrorism of the late 1970s. For Virilio, the lived experiences of ideological confrontation preceded a blueprint of simulation. It was the collapse of the nervous system upon itself that produced a shift in the deployment of new technologies whereby "the screen interface of computers, television, and teleconferences, the surface of inscriptions, hitherto devoid of depth, becomes a kind of 'distance,' a depth of field of a new kind of representation, a visibility without any face-to-face encounter."¹²

In Stan Douglas's recent video installation, *Evening*, it is this conjunction of ideological confrontation with a shift in the architecture of image proliferation that is examined. Commissioned as a site-specific piece for Chicago's Renaissance Society Gallery, *Evening* combines archival footage with actors playing news anchors to simulate three newscasts broadcast by three fictional local television stations on January 1, 1969, and January 1, 1970. The three newscasts are screened simultaneously side by side on ten-foot screens so that the viewer can choose to listen to one or all three news broadcasts at the same time. Through a carefully orchestrated chorus of gesture and speech, *Evening* explores a formal shift in the delivery of televised information from print-based editorial news reporting to a "happy talk" format of sound-bite journalism and informal chatter

that became the prototype for today's info-entertainment and personality-driven news.

As a glimpse backward in time, *Evening* is as fascinating in its evocation of image phantoms as *Hostage*. Similar to Birnbaum's installation, *Evening* amplifies a flow of information to leave the viewer disoriented, shifting between viewpoints and copies. But while *Hostage* identifies an historical moment in which the interface of television was unable to contain a political crisis, *Evening* examines how a transition in image delivery successfully defused an escalating ideological confrontation. Making the headlines in *Evening* are the Black Panthers, the MiLai massacre, The FLQ crisis, the Yippies, the Conspiracy Seven Trial, Ross Perot's failed attempt to deliver Christmas hampers to Hanoi prisoners of war and the escalation of the space race between the U.S. and the USSR. Fear of Soviet technological superiority is propagated by a report of the launch of a Russian supersonic airline, then assuaged by photographs taken by NASA of the moon's landscape. The infiltration and framing of the Black Panthers by American internal security services is mirrored in the media framing of the Black Panthers as preachers of "riot and revolution."

In the transition from a print-based journalism to a happy talk format that takes place between 1969 and 1970, the stories making the headlines and the images of conflict do not change substantially. What does change in the intervening year is the analysis of ideological and racial differences. In 1969, the Black Panthers and the left-wing student activist movement are presented as serious challenges to an ailing political system. By 1970, they have

become one-dimensional stereotypes of a fringe revolutionary menace to an otherwise stable democracy. Through a reordering of archival footage, Douglas points to the way in which the lived experience of racial and

ideological conflict are reshaped and restrained by the architecture of a global nervous system. Reflecting an ongoing concern in his work "to understand what kind of reality has been effaced by something else, because a particular kind of representation supposes a kind of understanding of the world,"¹³

Evening pries the viewer from a fascination with the spectacle of the media to reveal in his words "the fragmentation of interrelated events and atomization of historical processes"¹⁴ engendered by an image map of simulation.

In an earlier work by Douglas, *Fear, Pursuit, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.* (1993), a conjoining of a silent film with ghostly atonal music provides further insight into his preoccupation with exploring how history and representation are intertwined. In this installation, a recreation of a melodramatic

film in the style of the last silent cinema of the thirties is keyed to Arnold Schoenberg's 1930 *Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene*. Conceived by Schoenberg as an accompaniment to an imaginary film intended to express emotions, it is played by a computer-programmed grand piano. The film, an oblique detective story without an ending, is based on archival police records of an unsolved mystery of a Japanese worker who disappeared from Ruskin, B.C., in 1929. The valley in which the film takes place harbours a history of successive displacements and migrations. Named



View of the Ruskin Plant and the Stave River, Stan Douglas, 1992. C-print photograph, 46 x 41 cm. Photo courtesy of David Zwirner gallery, New York.



Still from *Pursuit, Fear, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.*, Stan Douglas, 1993. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Still from *Pursuit, Fear, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.*, Stan Douglas, 1993. Photo courtesy of the artist.

after the British art critic John Ruskin, it is the disputed territory of a First Nations land claim, the home of a brief utopian experiment based on Ruskin's vision of a communal socialism, the temporary location of a Chinese work force and later a community of Japanese Canadian berry farmers who were forcibly removed and interned in camps in 1942.

Through the disjunctures of the silent film and the rifts of Schoenberg's music, Douglas creates an eerie dreamscape filled with invisible phantoms of the past. Evoking sensations of inexplicable loss and pathos, his allusive and fragmented image map reverberates with another echo from the history of early modernism: the anti-geometric, anti-logical impulse of an avant-garde to link expression to emotion and to align art with the unconscious and the spirit world. For Aragon and the surrealists, this impulse envisioned the collapse of an ordered hierarchy of representation into a mythic flow of simulation. Through the mimicry of Europe's "primitive" other, they sought to unleash a magic coterie of

copies that Plato had banished so long ago. When this modernist echo is linked to the hidden memories buried beneath the surface images in *Fear, Pursuit, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.*, what emerges from a mythic flow of simulation is the lived experience of colonial oppression. Embedded in the mimetic structure of Douglas's installation are the legacies of conquest that brought the technological mastery of Western culture and the "primitive" other into visual contact.

Viewed in the context of *Fear, Pursuit, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.*, *Evening* becomes an examination of how the history of anti-colonist and anti-imperialist struggles is excised from technology's web of mediation. Mimicking a global nervous system in order to excavate the image remnants of these struggles, Douglas materializes what Taussig describes as the "unsettling and unsettled interpretation in constant movement with itself" when "the West as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its Others undermines the stability

which mastery needs."¹⁵ Locating in the simulacrum a meeting between an image map of simulation and a territory of oppression, Douglas traces the reordering of sameness within a global nervous system to render visible the invisible repressions of difference.

The historical moment that Douglas conjures in *Evening* was also the moment in which video's utopian beginnings sought to open a window on the world through the self-determination of "guerilla" community television and cable initiatives. It was at this time that heated discussions were taking place at UNESCO around the McBride Report in which the non-aligned movement of post-colonial states called for the establishment a New World Information Order to reign in the "open" and "free" access to communication technologies enjoyed and deployed by the United States of America. It was also at this time that the U.S. Congress passed an amendment in 1970 prohibiting government funding for technological research that was not directly linked to military concerns. In an ideologically polarized world, freedom and access were clearly dependent on one's political and economic resources in a global system of centres and peripheries, of postindustrial and non-industrialized nations.

Twenty-five years later, the call for a New World Information Order to reshape a global circulation of images has been supplanted by the economic demands of a New World Order. The ideological bipolarity revealed at the heart of the nervous system in *Evening* and *Hostage* has collapsed into a diffuse embrace of technology as a tool of enhancement for the human race. As such, we stand at a crucial crossroads in negotiating the relationship between the worlds we embody and a manufactured realm of images that envelop us. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War constructs an arena of representation in which the ghosts of history repressed by ideology emerge. The Internet, conceived as an infrastructure for the dissemination of classified military information, has become a site of global interchange. Yet if the interface of the Internet and the promise of cybernetic harmony are not to fall prey to the same dystopic fate as television, offering an illusion of the reordering representation that ends up affirming sameness in the guise of promoting diversity, it is paramount that issues of access and resources, of historical legacies and cultural differences, are integral to an image map of simulation.

In Birnbaum and Douglas's multimedia works, the examination of these issues is central to their vision of an interaction between machine and consciousness as one of dialogue rather than mastery. Constructing from archival images artistic interventions within a global nervous system, they create blueprints for the past and future in which it is not the interface of the screen that dematerializes identity and destabilizes experience, but the lived experiences of ideological confrontation and colonial oppression haunting an ordered hierarchy of representation.

Notes

1. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*, trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Verso, 1989), p. 71.
2. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (first published in 1863), *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 403.
3. Umberto Boccioni quoted in Majorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), p. 6.
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 3.
5. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
7. I would like to acknowledge Paul Patton's superb synthesis of Gilles Deleuze's critique of Plato and Seth Benardete's commentary on Plato in formulating my summary of Deleuze's theory. See Paul Patton, "Anti-Platonism and Art" in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*, eds. Constantin V. Boundas & Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Routledge, 1994), and Seth Benardete, *Plato's Sophist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
8. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. 265.
9. Cited by Paul Patton in "Anti-Platonism and Art" in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theatre of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 152.
10. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 70.
11. See *German Issue*, Semiotext(e), volume 4, no. 2, 1982.
12. Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (first published as *L'Espace Critique* in 1984), trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 12.
13. Quoted from an interview with Stan Douglas by Jean-Christophe Royoux, *Galleries Magazine*, February/March, 1994, p. 46.
14. Quoted from Stan Douglas's proposal for *Evening*, unpublished.
15. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 237.

Acknowledgment

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